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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 002193

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/23/2013

TAGS: [EPET](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: WARRI UPDATE 10/24/03 - ITSEKIRI WANT TO GO HOME

REF: A. ABUJA 1761

[1](#)B. LAGOS 1940

Classified By: JGREGOIRE FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. After more than a month of peace, clashes between ethnic groups in the Niger Delta appear on the rise, although less deadly than generally reported in the media. We have received reports of attacks and counter-attacks at multiple locations since Sunday, October 19. Chevron security personnel believe the Itsekiri are preparing to return en masse to their lands, by force if necessary, and the company is making new contingency plans in the event of a repeat of the widespread violence and displacement of villagers experienced in March 2003. End Summary.

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CHEVRON READYING FOR ITSEKIRI RETURN HOME  
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[1](#)2. (C) Fresh fighting was reported in multiple locations of the Niger Delta during the week of October 20. On October 23, Dave Beddow, a security consultant from Control Risks Group working on-site at Chevron's Escravos terminal and tank farm, told Econoff that Chevron's security team is receiving an increasing number of reports of violent clashes along the waterways of the Delta, but is frustrated by a lack of corroboration and confirmation of deaths and injuries. The security consultant said his team has intelligence that the Itsekiri are planning to return to their villages along the Escravos and Benin Rivers, and are attempting to align themselves with the Ilaje, an ethnic group occupying a narrow strip of coastal land North of the Escravos River toward the Delta/Ondo state line. The Ilaje have not played a major role in the ethnic conflicts of 2003. (Note: The Ilaje were reportedly attacked by Ijaw in the late 90s in a land grab. They are said to have quietly armed themselves thereafter, successfully repelling later attacks. Subsequently, they mostly have been left out of the ethnic conflicts.) Beddow also said he has information that the Itsekiri are reaching out to the militant Yoruba youth group the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), based mainly in Lagos. The OPC are widely known as thugs and enforcers, hired by other groups and even politicians to provide protection and to pressure and intimidate political and financial enemies. (Note: Some Lagosians appreciate the "protection" the OPC provides some communities by enforcing curfews and checking identification of people wishing to enter neighborhoods under their wardship.) A similar allegation of Itsekiri collusion with the OPC surfaced in September; the Itsekiri share a historic bloodline to the Yoruba people (ref B).

[1](#)3. (C) In a conversation with Poloff on October 23, Daniel Reyenieju, of the Itsekiri National Youth Congress, did not confirm the specifics of this report, but did express frustration at the inability of the federal government to restore law and order in the riverine areas of the Delta. He showed equal frustration with the perceived ineptitude of the state government to address Itsekiri concerns in the region and accused Governor Ibori, an Urhobo with an Itsekiri mother, as siding with the Ijaw. Reyenieju also made an appeal for NGOs and donors such as the USG to provide aid to the Itsekiri internally displaced persons (IDP) currently living mainly in Sapele. He told Poloff, "No one discusses resettlement or going back home," and added, "We will go home peacefully, but if anyone accosts us, we will protect ourselves." When asked if the Itsekiri are forming alliances with the Ilaje or OPC, he commented that the Ilaje are Yoruba, and have their own interest in protecting themselves against Ijaw incursions. He dodged the question of OPC involvement in the region by saying, "If Yoruba were involved in the Delta, the Ijaw would be nowhere. But if the Yoruba decide to get involved, they will do it on their own."

[1](#)4. (C) Chevron's security consultant David Beddow told Econoff that, in light of the information that the Itsekiri are planning a return to their homes, as well as the increasing frequency of violence in recent weeks (ref A),

Chevron's security team is standing-up a mini-IMT (Incident Management Team), to formulate contingency plans for likely scenarios. According to Beddow, based on the events of March 2003 and current intelligence, the IMT will devise response plans for three scenarios: 1) the Escravos terminal is subject to indirect fire as warring ethnic factions attack each other in the waterways and villages surrounding Escravos, 2) large numbers of villagers displaced by such fighting pour into the Escravos facility seeking refuge, and 3) one or more of the ethnic factions engages the Government Security Forces (GSF) assigned to protect the Escravos facility, trying to draw them into battle on the militants' home turf, namely, the waterways of the Delta. The security consultant said the IMT would have new contingency plans for Escravos ready by Friday, October 24.

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FIERCE BOAT CHASE NEAR WARRI  
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15. (C) Tony Obuaya, Warri security manager for Shell, told Econoff that on Tuesday, October 23, two groups of young men in boats chased each other to a point near the Shell waterfront of Warri. A group of five Ijaw took shelter at the Shell facilities, four of whom were injured, two seriously, according to Obuaya. Obuaya said Shell personnel provided immediate medical treatment to all the injured before they left to seek longer-term care. He noted that in interviews with the four who could speak, each gave different accounts of what had occurred, so much so that he cannot speculate as to the origins of the fight. But, he is suspicious that they were involved in something illegal and were trying, ineffectively, to create cover stories.

16. (C) Chevron's security consultant Beddow had previously told Econoff that government forces had "bumped into" a group attempting to steal a barge. The security forces gave chase, Beddow said, shooting along the way. Beddow said the would-be thieves then found their way to the Shell facility. Shell's Obuaya denied that account, stating that there was no barge involved, and contrary to one report given by an Ijaw leader to Poloff, Shell facilities themselves were not attacked.

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IJAW AND ITSEKIRI CLASH  
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17. (C) Chevron's Beddow also told Econoff that in a separate incident, some Itsekiri attacked an Ijaw boating party, resulting in one death and perhaps one Ijaw taken captive. Beddow said a Nigerian Navy commander confirmed this report. Similarly, Joel Bisina, a moderate Ijaw and head of the multi-ethnic Niger Delta Professionals for Development, told Poloff that on Tuesday, October 21, a group of Ijaw on a boat headed to Warri was attacked by "criminal elements" involved in piracy. According to Bisina, the attackers, whom he presumes were Itsekiri but also admitted he had no proof, took the boat and its passengers captive. He said other Ijaw later attempted to free the boat and its passengers, but that the armed Ijaw began shooting at the unarmed pirates, resulting in several Ijaw getting shot by friendly fire.

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IJAW AND URHOBOS CLASH  
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18. (C) In his conversation with Poloff, Bisina also confirmed press reports of a violent confrontation between Ijaw and the Urhobo elements. According to Bisina, on Sunday, October 19, a group of Urhobo villagers clashed with Ijaw on the waters between the villages of Okwagbe and Ayakuroama, which sit directly across from each other on opposite banks of a river. Bisina noted that a few weeks ago, some Urhobos were robbed along the waterways, and the fighting of the 19th may have been retaliation for that event as well as the result of a gradual build-up of resentment the Urhobo feel toward the Ijaw, who the Urhobo accuse of blocking the waterways and stealing from Urhobo boat travelers. Bisina estimated that 15 persons from both villages may have been killed on the 19th. He noted that press reports far exaggerated the event and the casualties, opining that such yellow journalism only serves to raise the tension levels in the Delta. (Note: Interestingly, both oil company security officials who spoke to Econoff denied any knowledge of this clash, even though they claim to have sources throughout the communities and offer details of other unconfirmed incidents.)

19. (C) Comment. Numerous conversations from different sources with Poloff reveal that feelings of despair and

frustration are great within the Itsekiri community. Itsekiris continue to express disillusionment with federal and state government and believe that only they alone can protect themselves. Their desire to return to their villages along the Benue and Escravos rivers is great, and they have stated their strong intentions to do so regardless of the violence that may result. Their previous reliance on the rule of law may be reaching an endpoint, as they now identify armed defense as their only option. A move to return to their villages may escalate small-arms conflict in the region. This instability continues to pose a considerable challenge to oil production in the region, as Shell has only recently begun pumping oil from the swamps again, and Chevron insists it simply will not, until the government establishes and maintains peace in the region. End Comment.

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